

## coming up only to hold you under by lonelyghosts

**Series:** [promises \[2\]](#)

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** 010 is sarah hopper, Dreams, F/F, Insomnia, Jewish Will Byers, Nightmares, Post-Season/Series 01, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD, Trans Mike Wheeler, lucas is bi!, steve is nonbinary, trans girl jonathan, trans girl mike wheeler, will is gay (obviously) and dustin is bi & a nb boy

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jonathan Byers, Kali Prasad, Lucas Sinclair, Max (Stranger Things), Mick (Stranger Things), Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Will Byers

**Relationships:** Barbara "Barb" Holland/Nancy Wheeler, Dustin Henderson/Lucas Sinclair, Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair, Mick/Kali Prasad, Will Byers/Dustin Henderson, Will Byers/Lucas Sinclair

**Status:** Completed

**Published:** 2017-11-13

**Updated:** 2018-02-01

**Packaged:** 2022-04-20 16:35:28

**Rating:** General Audiences

**Warnings:** Graphic Depictions Of Violence

**Chapters:** 3

**Words:** 7,063

**Publisher:** [archiveofourown.org](#)

**Summary:**

All of them dream.

## 1. nancy, jo, kali

### Summary for the Chapter:

Nancy dreams of the beginning. Jo dreams of the aftermath. Kali dreams of her sister.

After The Thing That Happened Nancy stops sleeping as much. It hurts too much to sleep. Or rather- it hurts too much to dream.

In dreams she's on the outside looking in, as it plays out over and over again. The darkness of the car as she sits in the backseat watching herself pull her shirt off and sees Barb, face half-lit but the anguish on her face plain to see. Barb saying, "Is that a new bra?" and her double nodding.

Barb, tentative, tries to say *don't go* without saying it. Her double rolls her eyes before pressing a kiss to Barb's cheek and replying, "C'mon, Barb, aren't you happy for me? This is what all those practice kissing sessions we had were for!" and Barb wincing so hard it hurts and blinking back tears before breathing out, "yeah, yeah Nancy."

She trails behind her double and Barb as they walk up the street in the dark, and thinks, *Barb I loved you back but I didn't know if it was allowed and I should have stayed home with you and watched bad horror movies and eaten leftover candy and held your hands while you blushed. I swear, I should've, I fucked up please come back, please don't be dead, let this be the time that I get to save you-*

But she doesn't get to do that. Her dreams are not that kind. Instead, she just gets to watch.

She dreams of the party, of Barb cutting herself on the soda can and bleeding slowly. Red drips down her hands. Sometimes, Barb bleeds out right there next to the pool while her double and Steve kiss frantically in the pool, lit by the outdoor lights as Barb chokes in their shadow.

Most often, though, she watches it all the way through, the way it would've happened, the- the *thing* that pulls her into the pool, Barb

crying out her name as she tries to escape, screaming as the thing eats her alive.

At first, Nancy screams in horrified anguish. After about a thousand nightmares, a millenia of relivings of the night she lost a girl she loved, she just weeps.

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Even before Will disappeared Jo had trouble sleeping. It goes back to when Lonnie started hitting her during the year that her mom and Lonnie divorced, and it never stopped. She used to wake up sweating and scared of her own father, nightmares of the days that he'd bruise her ribs and give her some half-assed apology and tell her, "Don't tell your mother, this stays between us,"-

Well. She's got a reason to be afraid of her father. And be angry, too.

It just gets worse after Will comes back, because when she does dream she dreams of Will, stuck in the Upside Down (as he calls it) and crying her name as Jo pulls her way through, hand over hand, digging into the wall of opaque slime and gelatin, tearing out chunks as she rips her way through, fingers curled into claws, desperate to reach her little brother-

She never makes it through in time. She arrives to see Will's cooling body, half torn apart, and she holds Will's body in her arms, buries her face in his hair, still sticky with drying blood, and cries.

So Jo doesn't sleep. She takes pictures of windows and comes to school half-asleep and tries not to let on to her mother that she's slowly falling apart from her own guilt, because it's her fault, she should've been home, she should've saved him from the monster-

Jo blames herself. Will goes to therapy and sits with wires taped to his head and talks about *cold* and *quiet* and *evil* in the dark, and Jo thinks, I should have protected you. I should have protected you.

When her mother notices that she's not sleeping, Jo starts pretending, because her mother doesn't need this on top of everything, not this, not worrying about her eldest while her youngest has been ripped apart at the seams and they've only barely managed to start stitching

him back up.

It's okay that Jo isn't sleeping. It's okay. She's seventeen, it's her fault, and she's unraveling, but that's okay.

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In sleep, Kali walks the halls of her memory.

She remembers that all eleven of them had slept strangely. 001 and 005 were in the ground by the time she'd been old enough to understand her gifts, but she remembers the others.

002 had dreamt of things that had happened a long time ago, before any of them had been born. They'd sat cross-legged on the floor and stared up at him, wide-eyed, as he talked about lizards a thousand times their size and men the color of bronze dressed in rainbow-woven cloths. Every morning, before they were separated to their own private rooms to be poked and prodded and hurt, he'd weave them tales that were more fantastic than they'd ever heard of, and their sterile room was cozier for the hearing of it.

003 and 004 didn't talk about their dreams. The two of them were twins, identical, down to their freckles. Father had called them a liability, because their gifts only worked in tandem, but Kali had heard that they dreamt of things beyond the comprehension of any of them- of colors and glass and blood and the end of the world. 007 said that it was slowly driving them mad.

Kali was only six when 003 snapped. She clawed out her brother's eyes and stabbed herself with a rusty shiv made from part of the cots they slept on. 004 survived the attack, but he was not around for long afterwards. The next week he was disposed of.

Useless without each other, Father had said.

It was then that Kali understood that she too was useless without her gifts.

006 dreamt of the future. They called her Pixie, because of her size- she was barely 4 feet tall at twelve years old- and her long blonde hair and big, strangely piercing eyes. She'd been able to fly, and she

floated softly along the room, her toes dragging against the floor, looking like a fairy all strange and almost-smiling.

Pixie was mute. 007 said it was because of her gift- you can't change the future, 007 said. Pixie would not speak of it, and when they asked, she shook her head slow and sad.

Pixie killed herself trying to escape.

007, nicknamed Lucky, was... different. She was only a couple years older than Kali but she knew everything. She dreamt of the truth, of what happened behind the scenes, of how the doctor who petted them in the daytime called them all failures at night. She had dreams of the present, of the truth.

One day Kali had woken and Lucky was gone. No matter what Kali said or did they did not tell her where Lucky was.

She still didn't know.

Kali had never met 009 nor 010 in person. They were in other parts of the facility, the 'high-risk patients' as Father had called them. She'd heard the stories though; 010 was a cancer patient that they'd revived from the brink of death. She'd breathed radiation, dreamt sickness, spoken pestilence, slowly rotting even as her sickness kept her alive. Screaming in pain constantly- it had come as no surprise when 010 killed herself by stealing a gun from a guard.

One of the more merciful deaths, if Kali was being honest with herself.

009 was a black hole of a boy, all big black eyes and bleeding fingernails. Kali had glimpsed him once as she was being brought back from an experiment; his room was dark, lit only by a single lamp. Around the edges where the light did not touch she could see his silhouette, the glint of his unnaturally sharp teeth as he prowled, mouth bared, making deep sounds not unlike those made by the bigger animals that they brought in for experiments that came from the lows of his throat.

It was almost a relief when she heard that they'd killed him.

But 011. Kali's sister. The one she had cared for so deeply, the one she'd practically raised. It had been Kali who had petted her hair, who had soothed her to sleep during nightmares, who had held her after grueling experiments. Kali had been her mother. As much a mother as she could be considering everything.

011 had been a dimension-walker. A portal. A thief. She stole between cracks of the world in her sleep and came back out with strange knowledge. Other worlds. In the day she'd been their weapon, their fighter, their tool, but at night, 011 had been the Dreamwalker, the Seer, the girl who walked between worlds and came back.

Kali dreams of her.

She dreams of a girl with curling hair in a loose flannel that hangs round her shoulders, walking in the dark. Her feet are bare and they make soft splashes in the black water as Kali stares after her, one hand extended, reaching out.

The girl turns to face her and says, "Sister."

Kali wakes gasping.

Next to her, Mick groans softly, tossing in the bed. Belatedly Kali realizes that in her shock she's scratched Mick's leg with her toenails and sighs, lying back down and curling around her lover so that their bodies are pressed together.

Someday, Kali thinks. Someday, Dreamwalker, I will find you, and we will build ourselves a new world where no one will ever hurt either of us again.

By morning, she does not remember it.

## Notes for the Chapter:

i wrote this bs at 2 am and im tired

009 and 010 are based vaguely off darth nihilus and sion from kotor

## 2. max, lucas, dustin

### Summary for the Chapter:

Max dreams of breath on the back of her neck. Lucas dreams of bikes and kids in the dark. Dustin dreams of standing outside and looking in through the window.

### Notes for the Chapter:

serious trigger warning for sibling abuse. like, seriously.

edit july 2019 because i now hc max as nb instead of as a trans girl. not because i watched season 3 or anything but just cause i rewatched season 2 and they read as nb way more than trans girl. however max uses she/her pronouns right now bc theyre closeted and questioning; everyone else uses she/her pronouns too bc they dont know any better

Max is fourteen when her parents get divorced.

At first, she's fine with it. More than fine with it. Her dad doesn't contest it when her mom files for sole custody, which- stings a little, but it's probably a blessing, cause her dad works sixty hour weeks and still doesn't understand why she likes to skateboard. He's not a good dad, and Max knows that. She just wishes he wanted to *be* a good dad- for her.

She knows, also, that he used to hit Mom. And she's afraid that with Mom gone, he might turn to her.

Her mother once told her that her father 'had a temper'. Max was in third grade and standing in the kitchen as her mother put ice on the quickly purpling bruise on her face, having walked into something she was unequipped to handle. Her hands felt useless- she felt useless, all of her, sentences congealing in her throat.

Max hated feeling useless. She still does.

Susan Mayfield smiled at her wobbily. As Max watched, the edges of her mother's mouth dipped, chin quivering. Her eyes shone with tears held back by force of will alone. "Men get like that sometimes. I just happened to be in the way. That's all."

Max wasn't convinced. But it wasn't supposed to convince her.

He stopped when Max was in fourth grade and accidentally blurted it out to a friend on the playground. If there was anything her father hated it was people asking questions, and so it stopped.

Susan found him in bed with another woman four years later. That's when it ended, and Max hoped maybe they'd be able to be a better family, one where she doesn't feel ashamed because she skateboards and wasn't originally named Maxine, or one where she doesn't feel stifled under the weight of bad memories. As if they're dancing around a question constantly, their toes perched on eggshells, questions dissolving in their mouths.

Max has long since learned that hoping for shit doesn't get you anywhere.

Her mother takes about three months to get married again, and Max is no relationship expert but she knows that's not a good idea. She keeps her mouth shut, though, because her mom's never listened to people telling her things she doesn't want to hear.

Max is the flower girl at the wedding. The dress itches, she's allergic to the rose petals that she's supposed to fling, and she doesn't know anyone there. After the wedding she takes a pair of scissors to the white gown and snips away till it's all patches of silky fabric. When she falls off her skateboard and scrapes her knee a couple of days later, she sneaks in through the back door and presses the white cloth to her leg until it's stained beyond what even bleach can clean out.

Her new dad is named Neil Hargrove, and he's- okay. Better than her biological dad, that's for sure. He doesn't beat her mom, even if he calls her names in the kitchen and yells constantly. Max has trouble falling asleep, but that's okay. At least her mom is safe.



What she hates is her new 'brother' Billy.

At the wedding, he glared at her the whole time and every time their gazes caught she looked away. The back of her neck prickled with something like knowledge, or guilt, or fear. There was something off about him- something that was cruel in the flick of his cigarette and the downward curve of his mouth. Max decided then and there that she wasn't going to be around him anymore than she had to. And certainly not alone.

It only takes a couple weeks until they're alone, and then it all goes to hell. Or so she's told.

Max doesn't remember what happened. She knows she made a dumb comment about Billy trying too hard to impress his father, and after that it comes only in freeze frames of something that is distorted by static. Bruises. Crying out. The heat of the cigarette only a couple of inches away from her foot as she twisted, screaming desperately, kicking out as he dragged her towards him. The rot-sweet smell of her own flesh as smoke drifted up from the place where his hand met her foot, and the burning pain. Words, too, garbled and incomprehensible, bits of talk like "no skateboarding now" and "see how you like it" and "stupid, stupid girl-"

Strangely enough, it was that part that hurt the most. She doesn't know why.

"You're not my sister," he told her, once they'd moved to Hawkins for Billy's therapist- Susan had said maybe a change of scenery would do some good- and she wanted to say "good" but she didn't know why. Maybe for the same reasons she'd started wearing loose t-shirts and hoodies instead of the more fashionable shit that Susan got for her, the reasons she didn't go to the beach anymore.

Hawkins is full of prying eyes and piercing gazes. When it's all too much, Max gets on her skateboard and feels the asphalt move underneath her soles, feet tense as she grips the pavement before pushing off. *If I go fast enough, she thinks, they won't be able to catch up. They'll never catch up.*

In her dreams, though, she feels the breath on her neck as she runs,

slipping through the leaves of the forest that border Hawkins, full of eyes and secrets and lost boys who came back to life. When she trips, inevitably, she can't help but cry out as a shadow covers her body and something stands above her, tall and unending.

It's a blessing that she always wakes up before she can look her pursuer in the face.

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Lucas dreams of towering trees and the static of a radio buzzing against his palm, a cheap walkie-talkie that's been through more than it was built for, four years of use and an alternate dimension under its belt. In his chest, his heart beats alongside it, rabbit-quick in his throat, a pulse louder than the crunch of leaves underfoot.

At his side is a girl with long red hair and a blazing face. She is a beacon in the darkness, an open flame, an invitation. Her eyes, narrowed in an expression of determination, are a taunt. Her very existence dares monsters to come closer- tucked between her arm and held close to her body is a skateboard. Lucas knows instinctively that she's prepared to hit someone with it if necessary- bash them over the head.

Her other hand is closed round his. As he looks at her, she squeezes their clasped hands and looks across at him. "Let them come," she says, and her solemn expression splits for a second into a grin that warms his heart.

Next to him is Dustin, holding a book in one hand and a lantern in the other. He is looking at Lucas as if at any moment something will try to separate them, tear them apart. The set of his jaw promises a hell of a fight if they try.

"We're going there together," Lucas finds himself promising, and something makes him soften, say, "I'm not leaving you," and Lucas has always felt bad at emotion, as if every time he tries to express it, it falls short and out of bounds, always the wrong thing- but the way Dustin's face lights up is the reason Lucas's heart beats faster, briefly falling out of time with the rhythm of the forest that surrounds them.

The walkie talkie vibrates against Lucas's palm and Will's distorted

voice crackles out, ringing in the silence.

"Take me home."

---

Dustin's dreams are not kind. They feature the dark, the closed door, the rattling of a lock.

When he sleeps he finds himself alone standing in the soft chittering forest that encircles Hawkins, the place where Will went missing. He can see only by the golden window light of an old cabin, cast out to mock him. Underneath his feet, the porch quivers with his weight.

He can't stop himself from looking in the window, the curiosity in him magnetized somehow. Inside, Mike and Eleven are dancing, and Dustin can hear the strains of a record playing Toto's Africa drift out the window. The old pink dress that Eleven was wearing when she went missing swishes against the back of Mike's knees as Eleven twirls Mike into a dip. Both of them are laughing with joy and something in Dustin's chest twists with jealous dejection.

Beneath his feet, the porch creaks and moans as if to echo it.

Before he can knock on the door or try to open it or even look away shadows swirl around him, turning the scene to dust before building it back up again. It only takes a few seconds before Dustin can recognize the Byers living room.

Lucas stands in the middle of the room, tall and broad-shouldered and smiling like it's going out of style, and Dustin is sick deep in his stomach as he watches Lucas bend his head down to kiss Will Byers, who raises himself on his tiptoes, arms wrapping around Lucas to pull him closer down as they kiss.

Dustin can't help it when he stumbles back. His heart is beating stupid fast and there is wetness on his cheeks. Why are you so jealous, he asks himself. You shouldn't be jealous don't be jealous this is stupid they're happy, why are you jealous-

The shadows bleed through his vision and Dustin is grateful for a second before he realizes what's happening.

He can't move as he watches Will and Lucas and Mike and Eleven and a girl with scraped knees and red hair gather round the table, joking and teasing each other, little playful jabs. They don't notice Dustin's absence, and his thoughts grow louder, drowning out their words as he watches them roll the dice across the table and move their figurines around, the way they tense when Mike speaks, her brow furrowed with concentration.

Something is defeated, a victory for the party that Dustin is no longer part of, and Will jumps to his feet to hug Lucas with shouts of joy and one of his flailing arms knocks a figurine off the board. It lands at Dustin's feet, discarded and forgotten.

He can't stop himself from picking it up despite the way his brain is screaming at him not to and his heart tries to force him away, but he can't stop himself from doing it. He is afraid to look at it but his eyes have gained a will of their own, and he can't, he can't look away from this trainwreck, this deepest nightmare fear that haunts him, has haunted him since his father left him-

Cupped between his hands is a figurine of himself, perfectly carved down to each curl of brown hair. As Dustin watches in abject horror, it dissolves between his fingers, slowly crumbling way until all that is left is a pile of ash.

Dustin's feet crumble beneath him, and he is slowly dissolving into what he knows he's destined to become, wind blowing away the ash that was once his feet and he tries to scream for help but no one can hear him around his mouthful of ashes as he reaches out with his disintegrating fingers-

Lucas looks up and meets his gaze, against all odds, and a wave of relief washes over him. Lucas- Dustin can always count on Lucas, on his steady cautious smile and bright laughter and dry humor and immeasurable compassion, his fierce protective loyalty-

And then Lucas smirks and looks away, and Dustin is gone.

When he wakes up it is only a dream, but Dustin can't shake the feeling that remains- the worthlessness, the outside-looking-in. Everyone will leave you, the dream whispers, and Dustin has a hard

time not believing it.

**Notes for the Chapter:**

in a modern au ive got the feeling that max would  
also wear heelies along with their skateboard tbh

### 3. will, mike, eleven

#### Summary for the Chapter:

Sometimes, at night, Will dreams of her.

#### Notes for the Chapter:

serious body horror warning for will's dreams, plus slurs and transphobic violence.

i have a big headcanon that barb & will teamed up in the upside down and they got separated at one point rip. maybe barb died, maybe she didn't, but will certainly believes she did.

i also headcanon will, jo, & joyce as jewish considering that noah schnapp and winona ryder are both jewish, and that is mentioned in this chapter! most of my knowledge of the practice of judaism by ethnic jewish people as opposed to converts is secondhand so just tell me if i got something wrong and i'll fix it straight away

Will drifts in and out of dreams that revolve around the Upside Down. There are a thousand variations, but they are all cold, and dark, and lonely.

In one common version, he wakes alone in the Castle Byers with black water soaking his shoes and rotting ivy growing up the walls like perverse Christmas lights. The pair of patterned pajama pants, dotted with little R2-D2s, does nothing to keep out the cold that creeps through the blanket that blows in the doorway and prickles on the back of Will's neck, seeping through a thin layer of skin to race through his veins, a parasitical infection that takes root in his heart.

Something is inside of his throat.

Will tries to cough, but blood comes out instead, pooling in the palm of his hand and running quick down his chin and staining. He is surprised by how warm it is, and for a moment Will almost savors it in shocked silence, before something rips through him from the

inside and the coughs rack his body as it tears at him, pulling itself out by whatever means necessary.

When the first sluglike sharp-toothed creature oozes out of his mouth with a plop, he squeezes his eyes shut, refuses to look. His mouth tastes of something sweet gone terribly bitter, full of salt and slime, and for a moment he almost thinks it's over (*stupid, it's never over*, someone who sounds suspiciously like Lonnie whispers) and then another rips its way up his throat and out his mouth with surprising speed.

He keeps his eyes closed throughout it all but he can feel the sickness even after the last of the slugs are gone. Will knows if he opened his eyes he'd see slowly darkening lines crawling up his arms and creeping cross his chest. Will is full of sickness, contamination, nuclear waste, he's lived so long in this cold wasteland that it has been planted in his internal organs and grown there, a weed that cannot be uprooted, slowly absorbing his lungs, his heart, the obscure corners of his spleen into this trauma that has defined him.

He is rotting. Dead boy walking. The kids at school are right to call him Zombie Boy, because he is something twisted and ugly, a lightning-struck tree that no longer grows, dead but still upright. Only a stiff breeze, the feeling of a cold breeze, the smell of mold, and he'll become nothing more than rotten meat, overripe for the taking.

Will can see the headlines now: LOCAL FAIRY FOUND DEAD, COMMUNITY REJOICES.

In other dreams, he is running, bare feet sinking into the sinkhole marshy ground. He can't breathe for fear and the way his lungs burn from the effort of continued moving. Behind him, Barbara Holland pants, glasses grimy with weeks of dirt. Their scent bleeds into the wind, the only warm thing left in this land of slow, drawn-out death left out in the rain for the vultures and the flies.

*Hunted*, the trees whisper, branches catching on his clothes, pulling him back for a moment- they whip across Will's face, reopen old cuts and press on new bruises. Even the landscape is a predator, here.

Hunted, they whisper. And he runs.

There is a cry of animal joy from behind him, shrieking strangely, the way vultures do, and he allows himself a glance behind him just in time to see Barb stumble, a dog-like creature arrayed with teeth that only a few days ago had been the size of Will's fist latches on to the tender area behind Barb's knee and bites. She gasps (not enough air to scream, Will thinks as he stares in horrified fascination, feet still pounding at the ground) and stumbles, then falls with a gentle splash.

He doesn't watch the monsters get her, but he hears the growling, the screaming, the sounds of tearing flesh, and the way Barb's screams turn into moans and gurgles and then, slowly, silence.

In a way, that is much, much worse.

Will runs and whispers the few bits and pieces of prayer that he still remembers, the words of the Shema Yisrael heavy on his tongue, tied into knots. Please, he begs silently. Please. Please. Don't let them catch up to me.

It's a few minutes into the dream that his luck runs out.

There's a large tree root along a ridge that he doesn't spot in time, and it catches under his ankle. He goes down hard, the wind knocked out of him, and something twists in his left ankle in a way that he knows does not bode well- it won't support his weight, he knows it won't.

Behind him, one of the dogs howls in gleeful victory. Will pulls at a thick length of wood, intending to use it as a walking stick, and looks up to meet the eyes of a girl he's never seen before.

She's skinny and short (but taller than him, though that's not saying much) and the knees of her loose, oversized overalls are ripped. The cuffs are rolled up four times, suprisingly white compared to her dirty falling-apart-at-the-seams sneakers. Her hair is a frizzy, ungroomed halo round her head, and though she is by all appearances entirely harmless, she is the most intimidating person that Will has ever seen in his life.



She offers him a hand up, and he takes it, grateful. When he pulls himself to his feet, leaning heavily on the walking stick, she has already diverted her attention from him to the army of dogs headed straight for them.

The girl reaches out, splays her fingers out in the air, and her eyes go squinty and sharp and cosmic, as if she has each and every atom in the universe memorized by sight alone, and pulls, somehow.

The dogs howl, but not in victory. They slump, oozing something white at the mouth and black at their seams, and stop moving, and the girl smiles, satisfied, as blood drips down her face and stains her once-white shoes.

A loose sleeve of her green flannel flaps in the wind, unbuttoned, and Will catches sight of the tattoo that states 011 with the precise, neat handwriting of someone who does not think they are tattooing a human being.

His first thought is of his grandmother, and the blue ink on her own wrist. His second thought is *Eleven*.

A hundred thousand questions spring to his lips, chattering between his teeth- questions like *are you still alive* and *are you okay* and *when are you coming back*, *are you coming back*, *are you safe out wherever you are?* *Will you come home someday?* *Did something happen while I was gone, because everything is different in a way I can't explain, did we all change without noticing it?* *Will you be our mage again?*

He doesn't need to ask them. Between them there is an understanding: the two of them, having walked through the Underworld and come out whole together, have no need for words. He sees the favor she's asking with her eyes: *keep Mike safe for me?*

Will reaches out, clasps her hand, and that is an answer in itself; no words could capture it. She smiles, bright and childlike as any of the kids that Will knows, and presses something small and hard into his palm.

Around the edges of his vision the horizon shivers and ripples and he opens his eyes to the sunlight streaming through the window of his

bedroom.

It wasn't just a dream- Will knows that. He'd know that even if he hadn't woken with his fist closed tight around a brightly colored red bottle cap emblazoned with 11 in white lettering, clutched so tight it leaves an imprint on his skin.

He stops fearing the nightmare after that. After all, how can he be afraid when he's not alone?

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Most nights, Mike dreams of Eleven.

There are nightmares, more often than not. In them, Mike sees her friends die a thousand ways. Sometimes, it is individually- Will, slowly rotting as he asks Mike why she didn't save him, blood bubbling at his mouth when he coughs, or Lucas, being taken down by a sniper in a tree as he runs, screaming into his walkie-talkie about how the bad men are coming. Dustin bleeding as Mike watches in abject horror, Troy pulling out his teeth one by one. Eleven, screaming Mike's name as the Demogorgon tears her apart.

Most nights it's about that last night, the last time that Mike saw Eleven alive.

There are a thousand variations. The bad men kill Eleven, put her down like an animal, and then they lock the doors to the middle school and light matches to the gasoline that has been poured on the floor. First it is smoke, and then it is heat, fire, ash, screaming as they are consumed, fists banging against the doors until it is over.

Or it's the Demogorgon again. It's always so much bigger than Mike remembers it- so large that it could fit a car inside of its jaws. Logically she knows that it wasn't much bigger than a human being, but her dreams never seem to remember that. When it opens its thousand-teethed flower mouth Mike sees a crushed camera and a revolver, the spikes of a weaponized baseball bat like chewed wood and metal between bloodied teeth. A cracked glass compass, the strap of a wristrocket, scraps of fabric from a pink dress.

In the kind dreams Mike is swallowed up quickly. In the cruel ones, it doesn't seem to ever end.

The worst of her nightmares have no Bad Men, or Demogorgons, or dying friends. They begin normally, as if they aren't a dream at all, except that Mike's closet is full of dresses and her drawers are replete with blouses and skirts in her size. They feel strange on her skin when she puts them on, her hands pulling with the zippers with a practiced tug.

In science class, El sits at the desk to her left, and their heads touch as they peer over the work Mr. Clarke assigns them, shoulders bent to the desks. El's hair is longer than it was when Mike last saw her, curling boyishly around the tips of her ears. She wears a white shirt that's at least two sizes too big and needs to be tucked into her jeans, the short sleeves billowy around her arms. *Miss Hopper*, Mr. Clarke asks when El raises her hand to give one word answers, and no one seems to be surprised by her presence, not even Mike except in the back of her head.

At lunch Will and Lucas banter back and forth, ribbing each other gently in a way that is almost flirting, similar to the way that Nancy and Steve used to flirt. At one point, Dustin jumps in and the conversation turns to his latest gym class failure, something that is a source of contention for Dustin and laughing for the rest of them.

"You guys never laugh at Mike, and she's the one who managed to get a sixteen-minute mile," Dustin protests at one point, when Lucas starts recounting the times that Dustin somehow managed to trip over a soccer ball and score for the other team. There have been numerous incidents. Dustin maintains that he's been cursed. The rest of them think he's just a lousy sport.

"Yeah, but at least Mike *owns* her inability to succeed at anything athletic," Lucas retorts, which dissolves into a whole new line of conversation. Will laughs from across the table, bright and happy and content in his own skin the way he never is in real life. Next to her, El's hand slips into Mike's like it belongs there as El smiles at her, half-secret and half-laughing. The sun couldn't outshine Mike's heart at that moment, she thinks.

She never knows what's coming.

It happens after a Science Club meeting that Mike stayed behind for, talking animatedly about space and stars and radio waves with Mr. Clarke. Everyone else is going home, and Mike's packing up her books into her backpack when someone shoves her, hard, and she hits the floor as they jeer, yell *faggot* like it's her name, kick at her ribs as she tries to roll over and get to her knees, at least, bloody her nose, relentless, to the point that she can't help the tears that spill out when they punctuate a kick with another slur.

They get bored eventually, and Mike kneels on the linoleum, teary-eyed and bleeding as her ribs ache with the formation of fresh purple bruises, staring at her reflection in the polished hall floor. She wakes with a lump in her throat.

It is a reminder that even if she gets everything she wants there will always be a catch.

She gets fragments of dreams, too, sometimes, so quick and half-remembered that she can barely even call them dreams. Bloody noses and whispered promises against the shell of Mike's ear, as fresh as if it happened yesterday. El's callused hand in hers, the crunch of leaves underneath their feet as they walk along the train tracks.

But sometimes- not often but sometimes- the dreams are good. Mike dreams of Eleven laughing as they climb trees, shoes gripping the bark of the trunk, or the quiet reverence of watching Star Wars together, shoulders leaning against each other, popcorn forgotten in their laps.

Her favorite dream, the one she holds onto long after waking: the two of them riding their bike together in the early morning dawn of suburbia, sky blushed pink and grass trembling with dew, the hem of Nancy's old dress flapping around Mike's knees as they reach the crest of a hill.

Against her back, El wraps her arms around Mike's waist, and they plunge down, both laughing with the thrill of the wind that rushes by so fast it feels like they could capture the sky in their mouths if they tried, both of them full of an infinite joy as they hurtle into the dawn.

It's a good dream. When Mike wakes, she swears she can still feel El's lips on the place that they'd touched her neck.

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Back in the lab, they didn't let Eleven dream. When she slept, they forced her to push at the edges of the dream until it cracked open and she found herself in the dark imitation of the waking world.

"You are a marvel, 011," Papa would tell her, petting the stubby buzz of her hair when she wept into the crease of his grey leg after a punishment. "We need to see what you can do."

During her sleep she wanders the black water world. Nowadays, there are no more monsters, or maybe it's that she wasn't seeking them out like she had in the lab, or back at Mike's. Hopper says she's safe now- no more fighting. She believes him, mostly, but she still slips through the dark cracks of her dreams into the Upside Down and walks, the only sound the splashing of her feet.

El wanders the Upside Down in her sleep because it has become habit, after so many years- or maybe it's muscle memory. Maybe it's the part of her brain that can't accept that Papa was gone and she's safe, the voice whispering in her ear even when she tries to rationalize it. The voice asks *but remember the cattle prod?* The voice needles, *remember the blood?* The voice grips her by the shoulder and pleads, *but don't you remember the bruising, the electrodes and the rip of duct tape, the hours of treading water? Remember the closet?*

*Do you, 011?*

It doesn't matter why she found herself stepping into the Upside Down before she'd even remembered it was a dream, she tells herself firmly. Instinct or habit or fear, it's all the same. She'd do it regardless. After all, every night El steps into the blackness and walks through the empty void in search of somewhere to go, something to visit.

Someone she missed.

Many nights she's drawn to the Byers household even though she'd never really met anyone in there except Joyce, only briefly- and

Joyce isn't the person she stops to visit anyways. Eleven sits next to Will on his lonely bed as he snores and feels herself reach out, the copper knob cool underneath her fingertips. The door in Will's mind opens into his dreams and when she could she stepped through.

Most nights the door is locked. Eleven can't bear to watch those nights- they are full of tangled sheets and sweat and sobbing for breath, begging *nonono* and it is too close for comfort, too close to her own closet fits, the hours of punishment. She doesn't stay.

When the door is open, though, she slips through, into the Upside Down of Will's dreams, the one full of rotting ivy crawling up buildings like the tendrils of some eldritch horror, where coldness seeps through Eleven's heart. This is the Upside Down as it is, the one that has open doorways in laboratories and underground tunnels as opposed to the mental ones that Eleven is able to touch.

It is awful. Eleven can hardly bear it for a few hours. She can't imagine staying for weeks.

There are ugly dog things that live in the place where Hawkins' woods would be, and Eleven followed them to him the first dream that they shared. He was so cold when their hands met, so incredulous at her presence, and she killed the demodogs the first night. All nights after, she keeps him quiet company in the hiding place that he and his older sister built.

He doesn't ask questions like "are you still alive" or "where are you" and she doesn't tell him to make sure that he and Mike and Dustin and Lucas keep safe until she can come home. They don't really need to.

Other nights, she checks in on Lucas and Dustin. Most nights their doors are open and she walks through the thresholds, discrete in the dark, a figure in the trees, a comforting balm just out of sight.

Most often, though, she visits Mike's dreams.

There are so many of them. Nightmares with barred doors on the nights that Mike calls her by name, nights that she can barely keep herself from breaking down the door when Mike cries out despite the

memory of the old man gibbering madly, unable to speak, when she was six and didn't know her own strength. There are kaleidoscope dreams that shine rainbow with memories and fragment when she touches them.

Her favorite dreams to enter are the happy ones where Mike sees her. She never recognizes El- that's something that only Will is truly capable of, as far as she knows- and instead El's presence is entirely natural. They climb trees and Eleven tugs the ribbons in Mike's hair, laughing- they watch strange stories about a war in outer space, where nebulae shine in the background of fights with swords of light, and hold hands the whole way through.

The dream that's by far Eleven's favorite is short and full of exhilaration. There is a hill, and their bike, and Eleven is flush against Mike's back, listening to the thrum of Mike's heart through the pink cotton of her dress. Mike whoops, her voice joyous and loud and unapologetic against the early pink dawn in the middle of suburbia and it is everything that they should have already gotten, everything they should already have, everything that Eleven is holding onto. It is the future. It is everything that Eleven is determined to find again. Eleven presses her face to Mike's neck as she holds back tears and thinks as loud as she can, *I'm coming home. Wait for me.*

When she wakes, Eleven sits in bed for a few minutes and tries to hold onto every detail of the dream. The way Mike's dress felt in the circle of Eleven's arms around Mike's waist, the sound of their heartbeats, the pink hope of the whole dream- the sky, the cold bike, the hair tie wrapped around Mike's wrist, the ease of the two of them back together again.

Just one more moment, she tells herself. One more moment of us again.

It fades so quickly, the memory of Mike's voice overtaken by the sizzling of Hopper cooking pancakes in the kitchen and the static of the radio in the den, the feeling of Mike's neck against her lips replaced by the fuzzy texture of the blankets.

Eleven sighs. Swings her legs out of the bed and stands on the

hardwood floor.

She thinks, *I'm coming home. Wait for me.*